

Yeltsin between two fires

St. Petersburg correspondent Roman Bessonov looks at the political fallout from Russia's brutal war in Chechnya.

A successful arsonist sets his fire from two sides. This technique, refined by the Venetians, was used in Russia by Boris Yeltsin as Mikhail Gorbachov's rival for power at the beginning of this decade, when both western-oriented liberals and Slavophile nationalists demanded that Russia separate itself from the Soviet Union. Now the boomerang has come back: The same game is being played against Yeltsin himself, by an array of ambitious politicians who are eager to replace him.

Yeltsin's own desperate gamble of waging a grisly, wintertime war in breakaway Chechnya has provided new opportunities to undermine the Russian President's authority. Several powerful banks with political connections have moved to shape the widespread outrage against the war into an anti-war opposition movement controlled by them. One such institution is the *Most* (Bridge) banking group, which has ties to "liberal" former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, economist-turned-politician Grigori Yavlinsky of the Yabloko group in parliament, the Russian Army's currently most popular officer Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, and other politicians.

At the same time, and from the same quarters, there are attempts to attach to Yeltsin "friends," who would make the President look repulsive in the eyes of the majority of the intelligentsia and even the Army. Here, the *dramatis personae* are familiar from the terrible events of October 1993; when the elected parliament of that time, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, refused to obey Yeltsin's order to disband, it was shelled out of existence by heavy artillery.

Barkashov's provocateurs

Soon after that Moscow tragedy, General Lebed tried to justify why he and other generals failed to support Aleksandr Rutskoy, the Russian vice president (also a general) who sided with the Supreme Soviet, even though Rutskoy was acting according to the Constitution. "Why, there were fascists near the House of the Parliament!" Lebed explained.

In fact, there were about 200 youths with swastikas on their sleeves in the much bigger crowd that surrounded the besieged Parliament building for more than a week. On Oct. 3, a day of violent confrontations before the shelling on Oct. 4, they were the first to storm into the building of the Moscow Mayoralty. The next day, most of them easily slipped away.

These fellows represented *Russkoye Natsionalnoye Ye-*

dinstvo (Russian National Unity), a small group of armed youth led by one Aleksandr Barkashov. They were schooled in quasi-pagan rituals, then "christened," but in a peculiar way: Their confessor was Lazar of Kashira, the false archbishop of the Underground Orthodox Church, a thief and previously one of the founders of the so-called Virgin Maria Church. Lazar taught Barkashov's recruits that Russia should be liberated from "Jewish and American dictatorship." Barkashov told them they would soon be needed to save Russia and establish the "Russian order" throughout the Russian Federation.

In the summer of 1992, Barkashov told his friends that a high-ranking KGB general was destined to take power in the country. This person, he claimed, had already asked Barkashov for assistance and promised him a high rank. During the siege of the parliament in 1993, such a man could be seen in the building from where he gave orders to Barkashov and his boys. He was Gen. Filipp Bobkov, deputy chairman of the KGB till August 1991. Now he was an aide to Speaker of the Supreme Soviet Ruslan Khasbulatov (and, remarkably, was himself elected to the Supreme Soviet from a district in Khasbulatov's native Chechnya).

But General Bobkov was developing another career, in parallel—as chief of the analytical center of *Most Bank*! When the crowd surged into the Moscow Mayoralty building on Oct. 3, 1993, Barkashov's boys kept them from getting to the upper stories, where the *Most* offices were located.

Informed Moscow sources consider Filipp Bobkov to be the real "brain" of the political group around *Most's* chairman Pavel Gusinsky, and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. It would appear that the general exploited the conflict between Yeltsin and Khasbulatov, as well as the rivalry between banks patronized by Khasbulatov and those close to Luzhkov, to provoke those bloody clashes that cost Yeltsin at least half his popularity and, moreover, left the relationships between the banking system and the top state officials free of any parliamentary supervision for a certain time. Who has counted how much money Gaidar received from the banks on Oct. 3 for his "struggle against fascists," and how this money was spent?

It is reported that General Bobkov also controls the "anti-fascist" paramilitary groups, comprised in part of veterans of the War in Afghanistan and young people mostly of Jewish origin. These groups were formed in 1991, after the idea of

setting up a "Russian National Guard"—put forward by a radical liberal, proctologist Vladimir Bokser—was rejected by the President's apparatus. Instead, these irregular formations came to be used as bodyguards for "democratic" businessmen. The ideological base was developed by the Moscow Anti-Fascist Center, the Liberal Club, and similar organizations.

In the autumn crisis of 1993, the artificially hatched "fascists" and "anti-fascists" were used to compromise the parliament. The "fascists" formed a guard for opposition rallies and for the parliament itself, thus "proving" (especially to foreigners) that its members were real and dangerous "communo-fascists." "Anti-fascists" such as Aleksandr Osovtsov specialized in provoking fights in order to get beaten and become "a victim of the fascists," meaning the supporters of the parliament.

In November 1994, about a month before Russia's military move into Chechnya, the "enemy image" changed. This was just after the strange murder of journalist Dmitri Kholodov, killed by a bomb while he was investigating corruption in the military. Now the "anti-fascists" started cursing Yeltsin, whom they suddenly found to be "totalitarian." (These same "anti-fascists" had been the loudest back in October 1993, calling for shooting the members of parliament and quickly adopting the rather bonapartist new Constitution sought by Yeltsin and welcomed by radical nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.)

What about Barkashov's boys? They are now supporting Yeltsin and his defense minister, Pavel Grachov, in the invasion of Chechnya!

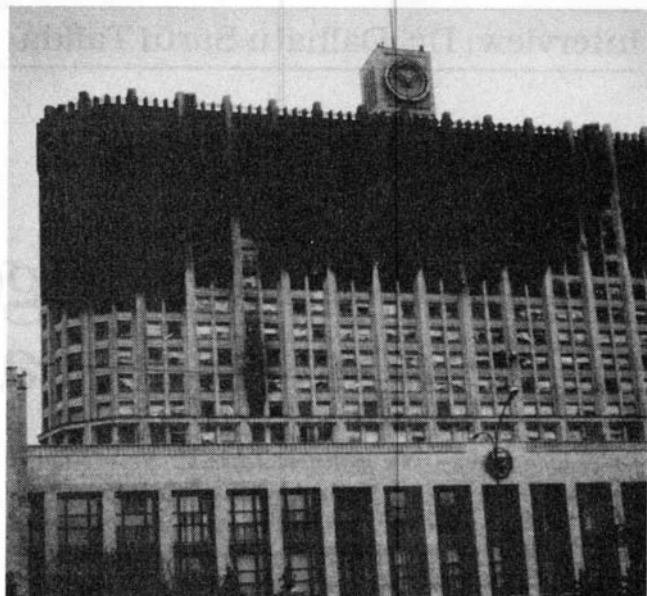
High Command compromise?

Will there be a new "State Committee for the Emergency," another coup? Will we see tanks shooting at the Kremlin? Until Jan. 10 it seemed quite possible. The strains of Tchaikovsky that accompanied the putschists in 1991 seemed to sound in the air. It looked as if Yeltsin's opponents were just waiting for his next misstep.

But on Jan. 10, ex-First Vice Premier Sergei Shakhray and then, quite unexpectedly, State Duma Speaker Ivan Rybkin, a socialist, dropped their critical tones. They started to call Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev a gangster and to swear by the sovereignty of Russia, including over Chechnya. The mass media also significantly shifted their anti-war tones.

The reason for these about-faces seemed to become clear the next day, when it was announced that the General Staff of the Russian Army would submit to the President himself, not to the defense minister. Chief of Staff General Kolesnikov and Grachov were to become more or less equal in their political weight. It looked as if a compromise had been achieved in the military elite.

Pavel Grachov's agreeing to such a change, downgrading his authority in the military hierarchy, may mean that the



The Russian Parliament after it was shelled out of existence in October 1993. Yeltsin's game then, is now being played against him.

accusations that he sold half the Russian weapons in Chechnya to Dudayev have serious grounds.

At the same time, the shift was linked to the efforts of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, whose position has become stronger again. Some analysts see this fact in light of the decreasing prestige of the *Most* Bank group, as opposed to financial interests with which Chernomyrdin is tied.

After Jan. 10 the tension in the political struggle seemed at last to calm down. But Rybkin was trying so hard to demonstrate that he stands for a strong and intact Russia, that he lit his own match from the "fascist" side. The speaker solemnly declared that anybody who behaves like Chechnya—major areas in the interior such as Tatarstan or the Ryazan region, for instance—would meet the same fate as Chechnya. Tatarstan officials immediately delivered a protest, followed by criticism of the federal authorities for their inability to spend money rationally. . . .

Rybkin's shouting and Shakhray's murmuring about the territorial integrity of Russia, however, does not ensure that the country will be really safe and united in the nearest future. For these two men, as they try to stay on the "winning" team, it is beneficial to strike a centrist posture. Former Security Council head Yuri Skokov, however, evidently sees an opening in the power struggle by playing on the ambitions of Russia's regions. Recently a meeting of Skokov's committee, Concordance for Russia, included a handful of regional leaders—but those from the key regions of Karelia and Tatarstan were among them.

Like Yeltsin, the whole Russian leadership remains between two fires and will probably have to make many new maneuvers during this winter and spring.